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J. Patrick Pazdziora

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“The Path of Pain”

George MacDonald’s Portrayal of Death in *The Diary of an Old Soul*

J. Patrick Pazdziora

A *Book of Strife, in the Form of The Diary of an Old Soul* (1880) may be George MacDonald’s most important poetic achievement: a towering but neglected work of Scottish religious verse (cf. Raeper 121ff).¹ Although prepared for publication, *The Diary of an Old Soul* is largely a confessional text. In three hundred sixty-six modified rhyme royale stanzas, MacDonald expresses his own doubts and questions, hopes and fears, surrounding his devout religious belief. In it, he fulfils the promise of his first major poem, *Within and Without* (1855), shifting his concept of mystic pilgrimage out of an explicitly narrative frame and turning it instead into personal contemplation. MacDonald covers a broader spectrum of themes, questions, and speculations in *The Diary* than he does in his own specifically religious poems like “The Disciple” (1867); the entire poem, indeed, can be read as a form of prayer, an act of *contemplatio* of God in Christ.² Only in his letters does MacDonald appear more vulnerable. In a sense, *The Diary of an Old Soul* may justly be said to be the touchstone of his work; it may be difficult if not impossible to comprehend MacDonald without understanding this poem.

There are, of course, several avenues of approach to this long and complicated text, and a single article cannot accomplish anything like a full critical reading. In an attempt to better situate the poem within the broader context of MacDonald’s works, this essay will examine the poem’s treatment of the themes of death and bereavement. As J. R. R. Tolkien wrote in an eloquent aside: “Death is the theme that most inspired George MacDonald” (75, 242); in apparent agreement, William Raeper wrote that “death was at the heart of MacDonald’s writing” (158). And Stuart Blanch, in his appreciation of MacDonald’s work, rightly notes that “the constant proximity of death . . . runs all the way through *The Diary of an Old Soul*” (6).

This article is an attempt, then, to use *The Diary of an Old Soul* to begin articulating a clearer understanding of this “heart of MacDonald’s writing.” It will first situate *The Diary* within MacDonald’s literary and personal context, particularly bringing it into dialogue with his first major

poem *Within and Without* (1855), before turning to examine its portrayal of death in close detail. The argument then turns towards a more theological comparison of MacDonald with Horatius Bonar, a popular Scottish religious poet contemporary with him, and concludes by discussing the inherent mysticism of his poetry. MacDonald understood death not simply in physical terms but as a spiritual awakening, a final ordeal before the soul's union with the divine. In his sermons, he expresses this idea with clarity and confidence; in *The Diary*, however, he struggles more painfully with his own experiences of bereavement. In many ways, *The Diary* can be read, in part, as his attempt to reimagine death, acknowledging its hideousness and horror whilst trying to understand it as a spiritual rebirth. Throughout *The Diary*, MacDonald's portrayal of death recalls Robert Louis Stevenson's lyric: "The look of Death is both severe and mild, / And all the words of Death are grave and sweet" (lines 1-2).

"Death cannot be what it looks to us"

Death arguably appears as a unifying thematic link throughout MacDonald's writings, more precisely a thematic centre (Raeper 158). Perhaps this is because, as Marilyn Pemberton seems to suggest, death "was one of the nineteenth century's major preoccupations" (36). MacDonald, she argues, sought through his writings "to re-establish faith in the existence of an afterlife," a belief prevalent in his youth but fading in his age (35-36). Yet this risks imposing a unity of purpose on disparate works where there may be none. MacDonald, indeed, seems more concerned with finding literary expressions of the real experience of bereavement than of bolstering a dwindling orthodoxy. Nor does Pemberton's view acknowledge the complexity and unconventionality of MacDonald's beliefs in death and the afterlife. Kerry Dearborn is more correct when she notes that MacDonald approached death in a way "unlike many of his own contemporaries and unlike many today" (156), in that he sees death as "life in its most potent and confronting form" (163). While somewhat lacking nuance, Dearborn at least allows a greater complexity for MacDonald than a strong assertion of set beliefs; what is lacking in this analysis is the broader sense of how MacDonald's views on death engage both with aspects of his own Scottish Christian tradition and with the tradition of Christian mysticism.

It is, in fact, admittedly somewhat difficult to precisely contextualize *The Diary of an Old Soul*. Poetically and thematically, *The Diary* seems to have little in common with its nearest predecessor in Scottish literature,

James Thompson’s *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874). MacDonald’s prosody is measured and restrained, imitating patterns of speech, in contrast with the Gothic excesses of Thompson. Nor is *The Diary* bound by a single conceit of imagery like *The City of Dreadful Night*, working instead on a conceit of the daily diary form; MacDonald is thus free to explore a greater variety of human emotion and experience within that form, and to employ a wide palette of images. Nor, curiously, is *The Diary* much akin to Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850), despite MacDonald’s admiration for the older poet’s work (cf. *England’s Antiphon* 329). *The Diary* is contemplative, whereas *In Memoriam* is introspective, encompassing a wide range of experiences in the spiritual life rather than dwelling on the problem of suffering. MacDonald places bereavement as an aspect within the life and faith of the poet—a large and difficult aspect, it is true but no more so than, say, George Herbert’s illness in *The Temple* (1633). MacDonald, indeed, seems to be somewhat deliberately evoking the seventeenth century, rather than his immediate predecessors; in sheer scope and ambition, *The Diary* seems akin to Herbert’s *The Temple*, as well as to John Donne’s *Metempsychosis* (1601). It seems likely that the metaphysical poets have a greater influence on MacDonald’s poetry than usually acknowledged, but the connection cannot be adequately dealt with here. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to note the parallel and move on. In contrast with the morbid introspection of Thompson, or the intensely personal reflections of Tennyson, MacDonald takes a more pensive and balanced approach to his topic. His concern seems to be at least partly pastoral in nature rather than merely introspective.

This is not to suggest, however, that the poem is wholly separate from MacDonald’s own experience. Throughout his adult life, MacDonald struggled with his own grief and the grief of others; he fought to reconcile his belief in the love of God with the existence of death. In a letter he wrote to his stepmother shortly after the death of his teenage sister Bella in 1855, MacDonald mused, “Schiller says—‘Death cannot be an evil because it is universal.’ God would not let it be the law of His Universe if it were what it looks to us” (102; cp. Greville MacDonald 251). MacDonald is at least attempting to sound convinced that there is another true face of death, as it were, unlike the one he could see. He appears to imply the impossibility for him to conceive of God being other than good, and yet death, seemingly unrelenting evil, serves as “the law of His Universe.” It seems significant that he quotes Schiller rather than the scripture; as so often throughout his work, he is seeking to understand death and bereavement through poetry, rather than

solely through the teachings of his religion. Nor was this a wholly intellectual concern; by the time he wrote *The Diary of an Old Soul*, he has suffered the deaths of his mother and two brothers in childhood, two grown brothers, his eldest half-sister, his father, and his two children. His wife, Louisa, had suffered similar loss in her own family, including the death of her mother. The poem's treatments of death can in one sense be read as MacDonald re-evaluating his earlier ruminations about death.³ He has grown more keenly aware of grief and its place in the universe, and confronts his own doubts with more forthrightness, "a sadder and a wiser man."

This internal struggle with the complex realities of bereavement serves as the basis of *The Diary*. This is strikingly illustrated in the following stanza:

Lord, loosen in me the hold of visible things;
 Help me to walk by faith and not by sight;
 I would, through thickest veils and coverings,
 See into the chambers of the living light.
 Lord, in the land of things that swell and seem,
 Help me to walk by the other light supreme
 Which shows thy facts behind man's vaguely hinting dream.
 (25 September)⁴

It is intriguing to compare this prayer for divine understanding with the vision of death in *Within and Without*. The narrative poem follows the mystic journey of Julian, a character with a Hamlet-like tendency for introspection and blank verse soliloquy (*A Dish of Orts* 268).⁵ MacDonald's Julian longs for a revelation of the divine love, and lives his life as a mystic journey of unification with the Crucifixion; ultimately, he discovers the revelation he seeks only after his death. After having died, he exclaims,

Can this be death? Lo! I am lifted up
 Large-eyed into the night. Nothing I see
 But that which is, the living awful Truth—
 All forms of which are but the sparks flung out
 From the luminous ocean clothing round the sun,
 Himself all dark. (IV.xxx, 66-71)

Julian sees death as a mystic doorway into "the living awful Truth," the utter reality—that is, into God. George MacDonald's study of Neoplatonism is self-evident. The night of death—a clear allusion to MacDonald's own translation of Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800)—reveals God's creative fiat in tangible form; the universe itself is the fiat, all forms and physicality

fleeting sparks from its essence. MacDonald took care to make it clear that Julian was seeing the Christian heaven. The “luminous ocean clothing round the sun” seems a clear reference to the “sea of glass like unto crystal” the author of the Revelation describes as surrounding the throne of God, especially since the Revelation later insists that God himself is heaven’s sun (Revelation 4.6, 22.5). Significantly, Julian describes the heavenly sun as darkness. This image runs throughout the Christian mystic tradition; the light of God is so bright, the mystics insist, it seems to be darkness. As the light of the sun can cause physical blindness, being too powerful for the human body to handle, the light of God can cause spiritual darkness, overwhelming the soul (Cf. Inge 109; Underhill 67, 148, 262-263, 506; et al.). Julian has entered a mystic heaven; not yet spiritually perfected, he cannot yet gaze on the light of God directly, but he realizes now that the darkness is God himself—the central, radiating light from which all being emanates. Julian sees death as entering a deeper experience of life, outside of seeming and touching actual reality. This is the image of death MacDonald returns to throughout *The Diary of an Old Soul*.

“The Shape Uncouth”

Death appears early in *The Diary*, possibly even alluded to in the first entry, if by “the path of pain” that will restore his youthful faculties MacDonald means aging and dying, and not simply the process of writing the poem (1 January, 6). After describing how Christ soothes him in spite of his questions and doubts, and after pondering his inconstancy of faith, MacDonald declares:

Death, like high faith, levelling, lifteth all.
When I awake, my daughter and my son,
Grown sister and brother, in my arms shall fall,
Tenfold my girl and boy. (4 January, 1-4)

Here death is transfigured as the gateway into true life, dying into a spiritual act akin to “high faith.” So it fulfils its usual function as the leveller of men—the point where everyone is unequivocally equal—not by *lowering* them to the beast but by *raising* them to brotherhood and sisterhood in God through Christ.

But such confidence of faith does not appear to have come easy for MacDonald. Near the end of his life, in 1894, he wrote to his friend Lady Mount-Temple, “So many dear ones have gone through the straits before us, that we must not fear to follow them” (364). Yet after encouraging both

himself and his friend to face death with courage, he writes “it is so much easier to say when I am well, than to do when I am ill” (364). In the same way, the unseen chorus in *Within and Without* laments “Were God’s love less, the world were lost, in sooth!” (IV Prologue, line 4). And in a letter to a dying friend, written unwittingly on the day the friend died, MacDonald said:

I know not a little about illness, and my heart is with you in yours. Be of good courage; there is a live heart at the centre of the lovely order of the Universe—a heart to which all the rest is but a clothing form, —a heart that bears every truthful thought, every help-needing cry of each of its children, and must deliver them.

All my life, I might nearly say, I have been trying to find that one Being, and to know him consciously present; hope grows and grows with the years that lead me nearer to the end of my earthly life; and in my best moods it seems ever that the only thing worth desiring is that his will be done; that there lies before me a fullness of life, sufficient to content the giving of a perfect Father, and that the part of his child is to yield all and see that he does not himself stand in the way of the mighty design. (“To George Rolleston” 305)

MacDonald suffered no delusions about the grim realities of the world. For MacDonald, to imagine the universe without “a live heart at [its] centre” seems to have been little short of terrible, overwhelming in its despair.

Writing to his cousin James MacDonald, MacDonald remarked gloomily, “This world is a terrible thing if the materialists were right” (303). There must be somehow a purpose, he says, and not just a purpose but a person behind it, or the world would tip over into madness. Again, in another letter to Lady Mount-Temple, he writes:

This world, if it were alone, would not be worth much—I should be miserable already; but it is the porch to the Father’s home, and he does not expect us to be quite happy, and knows we must sometimes be very unhappy till we get there: We are getting nearer. (340)

There is poignancy in the genuine wistfulness of this letter, especially the last line, “We are getting nearer.” For MacDonald, the hope of heaven is the hope of homecoming, an open door into the Father’s house from the cold, albeit friendly, exterior of the world. That the darkness of the world could be an exterior rather than interior darkness is central to MacDonald’s concept of bereavement and grief.

So in *The Diary*, he frequently prays for his own perception of death changed. It is in such passages that *The Diary* most recalls *The City of*

Dreadful Night, for instance when MacDonald relates a perturbing encounter with a personification of Death:

Yestereve, Death came, and knocked at my thin door.
 I from my window looked: the thing I saw,
 The shape uncouth, I had not seen before.
 I was disturbed—with fear, in sooth, not awe;
 Whereof ashamed, I instantly did rouse
 My will to seek thee—only to fear the more:
 Alas! I could not find thee in the house. (27 January)

The grotesque imagery appears to be an allusion to George Herbert. In his collection of sacred English poetry, *England's Antiphon* (1888), MacDonald offers the following quotation of lines 1-4 of Herbert's poem “Death”:

Death, thou wast once an uncouth, hideous thing—
 Nothing but bones,
 The sad effect of sadder groans:
 The mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.
 (*England's Antiphon* 177)

For MacDonald to call death “the shape uncouth” thus evokes Herbert's image of, as MacDonald describes it, “Death as personified in a skeleton” (177). Curiously, MacDonald offers the quotation as an example of an “instance of [Herbert's] humour” (176). By using the grotesque image drawn from Herbert, MacDonald is already playfully subverting his own poem. The skeletal shape of Death, though initially striking fear in the poet, has already been the horror of Death, with its uncouth and unspecified appearance, leads into another prevalent fear in the poem: the inefficacy of prayer, or of prayers inefficiently prayed. The poet cannot find God, or bend his will to God's; presumably, it is this which leads him to respond with fear rather than with triumphant humour. The resolution to both the poet's anxieties turns out to be the same: “a new prayer” (28 January, 2). Comparing himself to St Peter walking on water—or, rather, not—he pleads with Christ to answer Death's knock for him,

And lead him to my room, up to my cot;
 Then hold thy child's hand, hold and leave him not,
 Till Death has done with him forevermore. (28 January, 5-7).

Here, too, in drawing upon the image of a trusting child, MacDonald seems to intend a similarity to Herbert as he understood him. After quoting “Death,” MacDonald offers his editorial opinion: “No writer before [Herbert] has shown such a love to God, such a childlike confidence in him” (*England's*

Antiphon 178). So, in an apparent attempt at emulating Herbert, the fear of the “uncouth” skeletal Death knocking at the door leads the poet back to a childlike gesture of trust: asking for a grown-up to hold his hand while he tries to be brave.

Yet even the innocence of this trusting gesture is fraught with a more complicated meaning. The image of the stanza, viewed starkly, is that of parents holding their child’s hand as he dies; this may be a comforting metaphor in regards to one’s own death, but it is troubling in its closeness to MacDonald’s own experience as a parent, with the recent deaths of his children Maurice and Mary Josephine. Similarly, the import of this prayer troubles him, as well: when “Death has done with him,” will the Father leave him to the care of uncouth Death? So, in a recursion and deepening of the image, MacDonald intensifies the metaphor from a father holding the child’s hand—an image of presence and comfort—to a father cuddling a newborn child—an image of nurturing intimacy:

[Death] comes—and goes—to leave me in thy arms,

Nearer thy heart, oh, nearer than before!

To lay thy child, naked, new-born again

Of mother earth, crept free through many harms,

Upon thy bosom—still to the very core. (29 January, 3-7)

Death is replaced with birth; birth is presented as the second side of death (cf. Dearborn 161). A new life begins, represented as a slow, embryonic crawl “through many harms” to a place of intimacy with God as Father: a place of utter stillness and absolute rest. Intriguingly, God could be understood to appear here in a maternal aspect, elided with the “mother earth.” Thus the act of internment, of literal embrace in the earth, is reimagined as an infant resting on their mother’s breast; the “shape uncouth” is reversed from a menacing, skeletal presence into the fecund image of new life, a nursing child. Life is presented as a gestation before actual birth, which is death.

MacDonald had explored a similar reversal of a personification of death aspect in *Within and Without*. During an attempt by Lord Seafood, the Byronic antagonist of the piece, to seduce Lilia, Julian’s wife, Lilia sings a ballad about cheating death:

Death and a lady rode in the wind,

In a starry midnight pale;

Death on a bony horse behind,

With no footfall upon the gale. (IV.v, 23-26)

Death is escorting the lady to his own kingdom, but an unarmed and noble

knight draws alongside. The knight does not challenge Death; instead, he seduces the lady until “she turned and laughed at Death” (IV.v, 50). Knight and lady ride off together, erotic and immortal, and Death is described as merely “the mist of the morning gray” (IV.v, 51). In telling this vaguely Arthurian tale, Lilia clearly casts Lord Seaford in the role of the noble knight, a strong and sensuous Lancelot of sorts, with Julian—the dour, abstracted husband—a sort of living death. But later, when Julian is dying and Seaford seeks his forgiveness, the roles are reversed. In his feverish delirium, Julian mistakes Seaford for Death, and imagines himself as the knightly opponent. His monologue is one of the finest passages in the poem:

Oh! you are Death. Go, saddle the pale horse—
 I will not walk—I’ll ride. What, skeleton!
I cannot sit him! ha! ha! Hither, brute!
 Here, Lilia, do the lady’s task, my child,
 And buckle on my spurs. I’ll send him up
 With a gleam through the blue, snorting white foam-flakes.
 Ah me! I have not won my golden spurs,
 Nor is there any maid to bind them on:
 I will not ride the horse, I’ll walk with thee.
 Come, Death, give me thine arm, good slave!—we’ll go.
 (IV.xxv, 20-29)

Julian’s knightly defiance fades as he remembers his disgrace: he has not yet earned the knighthood of spiritual maturity, and his lady has abandoned him. From being a chivalric gallant like the knight in “Death and a lady,” Julian becomes a wandering pilgrim, reliant on Death to bring him to his ultimate destination. The staccato, strophic rhythm of the pentameter fades into the measured tones of lines 26-28 as he moves from arrogant fear to calm acceptance: “I will not ride the horse, I’ll walk with thee” (line 29). There is, of course, an irony in Julian mistaking the physically beautiful Lord Seaford for the Grim Reaper. Earlier in the poem, Seaford had described himself in a song for Lilia: “Oh, my love she’s like a white, white rose! / And I am the canker worm” (IV.v, 13-14). The reference is of course a burlesque of Burns, by means of Blake’s “The Sick Rose” (1794), in which the poet tells the afflicted flower that the worm’s “dark secret love / Does thy life destroy” (lines 7-8). The illicit lover, akin to the knight in Lilia’s ballad, is revealed as a devouring, deathly figure, a point on which Seaford exhibits some self-awareness. The dying Julian sees not Seaford’s beautiful exterior but the deathly centre; it seems not unlikely that Julian, as a mystic finally

escaping physical occlusion, can perceive the spiritual reality both of Seaford and, more crucially of Death. The final line of the monologue, “Come, Death, give me thine arm, good slave!—we’ll go” (line 29), seems addressed both to Seaford and to Death. On the one hand, it is Julian’s forgiveness of his erstwhile rival, recognising that they are both fellow-travellers toward death; on the other, it recognises Death as a “good slave,” the servant of the same divine master Julian now has been summoned to serve.

A quarter of a century later, however, when he writes *The Diary of an Old Soul*, MacDonald appears to struggle more keenly with bereavement, and with less confidence. Memories of his own bereavement cloud his prayers with grief, and he pleads with God for constancy in faith. Give me, he prays, reassurance in spite of the anguish of spiritual purgation: “Let pain be what thou wilt, kind and degree, / Only in pain calm thou my heart with thee” (10 February, 7-8). As the prayer continues through confession and penances, the darkness overshadowing his meditations hardly lifts: “I cannot think; in me is but a void; / I have felt much, and want to feel no more” (26 February, 1-2). He cannot find comfort or consolation, and fears that his longing for “some earthly nectar” of secular rather than sacred delight might anger God (26 February, 4-7). The solace he eventually turns to is Nature. Here he begins to find comfort, relating the process of writing the poem to the fleeting presence of songbirds at his window, and reassures himself of God’s own imaginative delight by watching the “gloriously wasteful” abundance of unique sunsets (1-2 March). This contemplation of beauty leads him to the contemplation of truth, and the realization that the understanding of truth he seeks will, he says, only be found in Christ—not through Nature *per se*, but through “the human thought of the eternal mind,” imagined as an endless, living ocean, reaching beyond death into the presence of God (8 March, 6).

“Nothing to be called death”

At this point, it may be informative to contrast MacDonald’s poetry with that of another Scottish religious poet, Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), a contemporary of MacDonald’s and a popular hymn-writer. Widely regarded both as a poet and a preacher during his lifetime, Bonar was the compatriot of figures such as Thomas Chalmers and Robert Murray M’Cheyne. An active evangelical minister in and around Kelso, he was one of the founders of the Free Church in the schism of 1843 (Bell 247; cf. *Horatius Bonar* ch. 1-3). Such was his popularity that in 1897 a critic was moved to declare: “Probably it is not unreasonable to think that Dr. Bonar possessed as much genuine

poetic power of any hymn writer of the present century except Cardinal Newman" (Bell 248).

Bonar specifically addresses child death in his lyric "Lucy" (c1858), published in his 1863 collection *Hymns of Faith and Hope*. While from a literary standpoint the echo of Wordsworth is inevitable, and unflattering to Bonar, the poem in fact recounts the actual death of Bonar's four-year-old daughter, Lucy. There is genuine anxiety and sorrow beneath the weaknesses of prosody:

All night we watched the ebbing life,
As if its flight to stay;
Till, as the dawn was coming up,
Our last hope pass'd away

Above the couch we bent and prayed,
In the half-lighted room;
As the bright hues of infant-life
Sank slowly into gloom. (lines 1-4, 9-12)

The poem details the ministrations of the stricken parents as their child is dying. There is a marked helplessness to their actions, and they seem keenly aware that their child will not recover. There is also a distinct physicality to the parent's interactions with their daughter. They "stroked the little sinking cheeks" (line 17), "kissed the small, round, ruby mouth" (line 19), "fondly smooth'd the scattered curls" (line 21), and "held the gentle palm in ours" (line 23); the reason the poem gives is simply "For Lucy was still there" (lines 20, 24). By such tactile gestures of affection, the parents feel they are able to give her real comfort despite their helplessness; in part, at least, such gestures are an attempt to physically affirm her presence with them. The physical expressions of affection are shown as countering, in a sense, the physical effects of illness.

Consequently, when the child dies, "we ceased to kiss those lips, / For Lucy was not there" (lines 35-36). The child's body is thus not represented as the child herself; the child's spiritual identity, which has departed, can no longer be communicated with by any physical means. While the emotion of the poem is genuine and moving, it offers an unremarkable conception of death, especially in a poem by a Free Church minister. Equally typical is the comfort that Bonar expresses in the hope of resurrection:

But years are moving quickly past,
And time will soon be o'er;

Death shall be swallowed up of life
On the immortal shore.

Then we shall clasp that hand once more,
And smooth that golden hair;
Then we shall kiss those lips again,
When Lucy shall be there. (lines 41-48)

Bonar seems here to envision the bodily resurrection of Christian orthodoxy, as it involves the restoration of the physical interaction of the parents with their child; the gestures initially given in comfort and despair are transmuted into joy and recognition. What is most curious about this passage, in contrast with MacDonald, is its implicit materialism. Death is presented as wholly and uniquely a material phenomenon, specifically the severing of physical communication between those who have not died and those who have. The Christian hope of life after death is presented in equally material terms: it is particularly the physical presence of the daughter which the parents are missing, and which Bonar believes will be restored.

Central to Bonar's conception of death as a physical phenomenon is the destruction of death at the end of time. In *The Night of Weeping* (1852), a pastoral volume intended to bring comfort to grieving Christians, Bonar writes that a future of "surpassing glory" in a Holy City is the first and greatest consolation of the Christian (163). A characteristic passage declares:

We have not many days to suffer, nor many nights to watch, even though our whole life were filled up with weary days and sleepless nights. "Our light affliction is but for a moment." And besides the briefness of our earthly span, we know that the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. This is consolation, for it tells us not only of the end of our tribulation, but the beginning of our triumph; nay, and not only of our individual rest from trouble; but of the rest and deliverance of the whole church together. For then the whole "body of Christ," waking or sleeping, shall be glorified with their glorified Lord, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. In the day of bereavement, the day of mourning over those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, this consolation is especially precious. (172)

This passage presents death in the context of the doctrine *Christus Victor*, and its eventual defeat is described in militaristic terms. Indeed, Bonar decided to publish "Lucy" in his collection *Hymns of Hope and Faith*, which frequently relies on imagery of Christ as the triumphant military victor.⁶ Notably, the

hymn “He is Risen” describes “The Conqueror, not the conquer’d, He to whom / The keys of death and the grave belong” (lines 17-18) storming in triumph from the prison of death. But it is worth noting that Bonar seems to anticipate ultimate triumph over death, and the individual believer’s experience of bodily resurrection and the reunion with deceased loved ones, only in the context of the eschaton. Although “He is Risen” describes the death of the faithful as “the gate of life” (line 42) and the dead as victors in “[t]heir life-long battle with disease and pain” (line 49).

This ostensibly military victory is then elided the traditional image of death as sleep; Bonar further clarifies:

They are not tasting death, but taking rest,
On the same couch were Jesus lay,
Soon to awake all glorified and blest,

When day has broke and shadows fled away. (lines 53-56)

The victory of Christ has evidently transmuted the experience of death into a kind of sleep. Nor is it wholly evident from this poem whether this sleep is implied to include actual loss of consciousness, as physical sleep does; the absence of any sense of the dead being already “with me in paradise” (St Luke 23.43) seems to suggest this. It could also be possible that rest is being used allegorically for the dead enjoying the presence of God in heaven. In either case, the resurrection and the completion of Christ’s victory over death is once again presented in almost exclusively physical terms; resurrection is a bodily experience, either a profound returning of consciousness or the entrance of the spirit to a renewed physical body.

All this, of course, would have been a common enough belief in Bonar’s day, and is still believed in some form by many Christians today. Yet this passage accentuates a difficulty in presenting MacDonald’s understanding of death. A superficial reading of Bonar’s poem may recall the final chapters of *Lilith* (1895), as Vane and his companions lie down to sleep in a crypt and wake at the ending of the world. Certainly MacDonald describes death as sleep throughout chapter VIII of *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870), “The Raising of the Dead.” But the similarity is strictly one of terminology: both Christ in the Gospels and St Paul describe death as sleep, and while Bonar and MacDonald both employ the biblical term they do not assume the same meaning. In *Miracles of Our Lord*, MacDonald writes that when Christ referred to death as sleep:

It is as if he told us that our notion of death is all wrong, that there is no such thing as we think it; that we should be nearer the truth if we

denied it altogether, and gave to what we now call death the name of sleep, for it is but a passing appearance, and no right cause of such misery as we manifest in its presence Indeed the notion of death, as we feel it, seems to have vanished entirely from St Paul's mind—he speaks of things so in a continuity, not even referring to the change—not even saying *before death* or *after death*, as if death made no atom of difference in the progress of holy events, the divine history of the individual and of the race together. (382-383, emphasis in original)

The difference in thought here between Bonar and MacDonald is crucial. Whereas Bonar presents death as a physical adversary over which the victorious Christ triumphs militarily, MacDonald portrays it as an awakening of the individual consciousness to a divine perception of what the world actually is and how it actually works. It is “the notion of death, as we feel it” that has “vanished entirely from St Paul's mind.” In other words, death is defined by mental and spiritual understanding more than its physical reality. Earlier, MacDonald goes so far as to claim that the resurrection of the body is not, in fact, the essential component of Christ's teaching, saying “the resurrection he taught was a far deeper thing—the resurrection from dead works to serve the living and true God” (*Miracles* 381). Again, it is a change of spiritual perspective, a recognition of how, in MacDonald's understanding, the world had been created to function, that he sees as spiritually significant and which he is trying to convey.

It seems apparent that Bonar drew consolation from the thought of death as a conquered enemy, and from his belief in a bodily resurrection manifested by the physical reunion of one's family. That he attempted to share that consolation with others is commendable. Nor does it appear unlikely that MacDonald drew a similar comfort from these aspects of Christian doctrine. But it would be incorrect to limit MacDonald's understanding to these aspects; he seems to have positioned death together with the whole of the physical world as an occlusion of ultimate reality, which the devout mystic sought to dispel.⁷ So he asserts: “The death of not believing in God—the God revealed in Jesus—is the only death. The other is nowhere but in the fears and fancies of unbelief There is for him nothing to be called death; nothing that is what death looks to us” (*Miracles* 386).

There is, of course, a significant theological difference between Bonar and MacDonald here, which extends beyond the matter of the resurrection. Bonar advocated the same Scottish hyper-evangelicalism that

MacDonald rejected. Indeed, Bonar elaborates at some length in *The Night of Weeping* the particular doctrine that “[c]hastening love is the faithfulest, purest, truest, tenderest, deepest of all” (174) which MacDonald lampoons in his short story “The Gifts of the Child Christ” (1883). This present study, however, is less concerned with their respective theologies than with their poetry, and for our purposes it is sufficient to note the difference and move on. What should be clear is that MacDonald is not only operating within more technically complex poetic forms than Bonar, but that his ideological emphasis is less on triumphing over a vanquished physical enemy than on realigning patterns of thought and imagination to develop spiritual, mystical awareness of the world.

“To die of love”

The confidence with which MacDonald expresses these ideas in *Miracles of Our Lord*, however, can be read as the generic self-assurance of a homiletic text. MacDonald personally—and understandably—seems to have struggled with fears of death and bereavement. It seems fitting, then, when MacDonald turns from addressing God to speaking to his dead children:

I love you, my sweet children, who are gone
 Into another mansion; but I know
 I love you not as I shall love you yet.
 I love you, sweet dead children; there are none
 In the land to which ye vanished to go,
 Whose hearts more truly on your hearts are set—
 Yet should I die of grief to love you only so. (18 March)

He continues to envision the material world as part of the Father’s house, but not all of it. His image deliberately borrows from Christ’s words in St John’s gospel: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you” (14.3). The leap, then, is from one mansion into another; dying is moving to another view, or another encounter, or simply another diversion. Yet the living father and the dead children can be united in that they are still in the divine Father’s house, together by love. Even in heaven, MacDonald adds wistfully, “there are none . . . whose hearts more truly on your hearts are set” (lines 4,6). Even the perfect love of the saints and angels, he says, cannot equal the truth and depth of imperfect, still living parents for their dead children. And yet this deepest of loves he says can still be perfected. MacDonald’s longing for death, and his embrace of his own old age and mortality, was a longing to be perfected in love—a longing to live

love. He writes:

Oh, my beloved, gone to heaven from me!
 I would be rich in love to heap you with love;
 I long to love you, sweet ones, perfectly—
 Like God, who sees no spanning vault above,
 No earth below, and feels no circling air—
 Infinitely, no boundary anywhere!

I am a beast until I love as God doth love. (14 March)

MacDonald, as a bereaved father writing to his children, expresses a deeply human, parental wish: he wants to give his children more gifts than he is able to at the moment. He wants “to love you, sweet ones, perfectly” (line 3), that is, with divine purity of sacred love, not bound in temporal space, memory, or presence. His natural longing to see his children again becomes a longing to relate to them without the occlusion of physical nature.

MacDonald had already depicted death as the refiner of love in *Phantastes* (1858). Anodos, the knight-errant protagonist, after being killed and buried, realizes that death is simply liberation into purity of love. His apotheosis is central to the book and can be read as a sort of imaginative *credo* for MacDonald’s writings. Anodos explains:

I knew now, that it is by loving, and not by being loved, that one can come nearest the soul of another; yea, that, where two love, it is the loving of each other, and not the being beloved by each other, that originates and perfects and assures their blessedness. I knew that love gives to him that loveth, power over any soul beloved, even if that soul know him not, bringing him inwardly close to that spirit; a power that cannot be but for good; for in proportion as selfishness intrudes, the love ceases, and the power which springs therefrom dies. Yet all love will, one day, meet with its return. All true love will, one day, behold its own image in the eyes of the beloved, and be humbly glad. This is possible in the realms of lofty Death. (*Phantastes* 181)

Love moves outward, from lover to beloved; the giving of love is what perfects the soul and perfects the love given. MacDonald again enters into the Christian mystic tradition of using erotic language to describe the union of the soul with God. True human interaction, true love, is possible only inasmuch as love is selfless. All love is pure giving, endless pouring out of itself until finding itself in the beloved. As Evelyn Underhill eloquently writes:

Love’s characteristic activity—for Love, all wings, is inherently active, and “cannot be lazy,” as the mystics say—is a quest, an outgoing towards an object desired, which only when possessed will be fully known, and only when fully known can be perfectly adored. Intimate communion, no less than worship, is of its essence. Joyous fruition is its proper end. This is true of all Love’s quests, whether the Beloved be human or divine—the bride, the Grail, the Mystic Rose, the plenitude of God. (Underhill 55)

Anodos longs for perfection of love, always outpouring but never exhausted.⁸ People, he says, were created out of the love of God, “the depths of light,” and so through loving return to union with that love: “From the sun-heart I came, of love a spark: / What should I do but love with all my might?” (16 March, 3-4). Yet notice MacDonald’s conclusion: “This is possible in realms of lofty Death” (*Phantastes* 181). If death, then, is a doorway into perfected love, MacDonald reasons, it must likewise be a doorway into true life. The conclusion of this premise is logical but startling:

But love is life. To die of love is then
The only pass to higher life than this.
All love is death to loving, living men;
All deaths are leaps across clefts to the abyss.
Our life is the broken current, Lord, of thine,
Flashing from morn to morn with conscious shine—

Then first by willing death self-made, then life divine. (17 March)

Living and dying are here presented as two different experiences of love—with dying in fact being the richer of the two. The action of accepting the natural moment of death, MacDonald says, and embracing mortality, breaks into true “life divine,” a life indistinguishable and inseparable from love. Dying is not here imagined as a passive waiting for the soul to be received, nor solely as a material breakdown of the physical body, but a vigorous seizing of life. “All deaths are leaps across clefts to the abyss” (line 4). The reference to plural “deaths” here is curious. Consider the following quotation Underhill offers from Johann Tauler, the German mystic:

“This dying,” says Tauler again, “has many degrees, and so has this life. A man might die a thousand deaths in one day and find at once a joyful life corresponding to each of them. This is as it must be: God cannot deny or refuse this to death. The stronger the death the more powerful and thorough is the corresponding life; the more intimate the death, the more inward is the life . . . A great life makes

reply to him who dies in earnest even in the least things, a life which strengthens him immediately to die a greater death; a death so long and strong, that it seems to him hereafter more joyful, good and pleasant to die than to live, for he finds life in death and light shining in darkness.” (262-263)⁹

This raises a striking possibility surrounding MacDonald’s discussion of death, and its importance as, in Tolkien’s words, “the theme which most inspired” him. Tauler is here talking not simply about actual, physical death, but the mystical experience of mortification, that is, the reordering of one’s character to mystical awareness through ascetic practice and self-denial (Underhill 26). Tauler presents the mystic life, then, as a series of small deaths and increasing life; as the mystic becomes more detached from the illusions of the physical world, she becomes more strongly alive to spiritual reality. This seems to be what MacDonald has in mind when he equates love with death, and declares that human life is an extension of Divine life, “first by willing death self-made” (18 March, 7).¹⁰

It would appear that MacDonald’s understanding of death, and his portrayal of it throughout *The Diary*, includes both bodily death and the mystic practice of mortification; the mystical experience leads by slow degrees to the full perfection of bodily death and subsequent union with the divine. Death, then, is best treated carefully as a powerful polyvalent and necessarily mystical theme in his writings. This is, perhaps, a natural and even predictable conclusion for an artist with MacDonald’s mystical tendencies to come to—MacDonald was hardly the first writer to voice this view. But it represents an important aspect of his thought both on death and on the spiritual life, which informs his contributions to Scottish literature.

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notes. Any remaining errors are entirely the author's.

Endnotes

1. Raeper seems to assign this place to *Within and Without* (1855), while somehow overlooking the mystical significance of that poem's eroticism. Despite the significance of the earlier work, it is embryonic, containing suggestions of themes MacDonald would go on to develop more deeply and with greater skill in *The Diary*. In general, Raeper tends to be overly dismissive of MacDonald's poetry; there is arguably much more literary and theological merit in the poems than he appears to think (cf. 125).
2. A recent edition of *The Diary* has been, in fact, published in tandem with Betty Aberlin's *The White Page Poems* (Wayne 2008), a series of short poems composed as a devotional response to MacDonald's own; Aberlin positions both her poems and MacDonald's specifically as a form of prayer, even of communion, beginning with an invocation: "Receive this prayer in which I join my soul / Now, spiraling beyond time, within, world / Without end" (Jan. 1/1, lines 2-4).
3. Washick asserts that MacDonald wrote *The Diary* in direct response to the deaths of Mary Josephine and Maurice, "[p]artly as a means of dealing with his grief and partly as a response in consoling his wife where other traditional forms of religious comforting were failing her" (122); unfortunately, he does not provide citation for this claim. This assertion serves as the basis for his thematic treatment of death in *The Diary* (137-140); his analysis is, however, surprisingly brief, and does not advance much beyond simple collation of relevant passages. His conclusion that *The Diary* represents "a humble reliance on God" as opposed to "a questioning faith" seems tendentious (142).
4. Each stanza of *The Diary* is prefaced with a date, meant as a calendar for daily devotional reading. Certain stanzas, notably 25 December, contain a reflection on the Christian feast celebrated on that day. Since no reputable edition of *The Diary* is printed without these dates, for both ease and precision I have chosen to give citations to date and line numbers, rather than to specific pages. Where an entire stanza is quoted, only the date is given.
5. Julian's name is very likely significant; it may suggest that he is in some ways MacDonald's appropriation of Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo* (1818), a poem which MacDonald likely knew.
6. Cf. "Be Still," "The Cross and the Crown," "His Own Received Him

Not,” “He is Risen,” “The Good Fight,” “The Grave of Ocean,” “The Battle-Song of the Church,” “The Self-Challenge,” “The Sin and the Sinbearer,” “Hymn of the Last Days,” “It is Finished”; cf. “He is Coming,” “The Judgement,” “Life and I,” “The Christ of God,” “The Great Message,” “Thou Believest? What Then?,” “Battle Song Against Satan,” et al.

7. For a succinct presentation of this view from a text of which MacDonald may have been aware, cf. *Theologica Germanica*, ch. VII, VIII:
 “Now, the created soul of man also has two eyes. One represents the power to peer into the eternal. The other gazes into time and the created world, enabling us to distinguish between the lofty and the less lofty, as I said above. But these two eyes, which are parts of man’s soul, cannot carry out their functions simultaneously. If the soul is looking into eternity through its right eye, the left eye must cease all its undertakings and act as if it were dead. If the left eye were to concentrate on things of this outer world (that is to say, be absorbed by time and created beings), it would hinder the musing of the right eye” (Hoffman’s translation, 68).
8. Cf. Underhill, 441: “‘Oh, wonder of wonders,’ cries Eckhart, ‘when I think of the union the soul has with God! He makes the enraptured soul to flee out of herself, for she is no more satisfied with anything that can be named. The spring of Divine Love flows out of the soul and draws her out of herself into the unnamed Being, into her first source, which is God alone.’”
9. MacDonald’s connection to Tauler has not, to my knowledge, been definitely established; Ronald MacDonald does not specifically name him as an influence on his father (88), yet it seems possible that MacDonald may have been familiar with his thought. Certainly MacDonald seems to have been well acquainted with the school of German mysticism which Tauler represents. It is worth mentioning that Underhill notes that the above quotation “is not included in either of the English collections” extant in 1912 (263), and cites a German edition published in Prague in 1872; it is not impossible, therefore, though by no means certain, for MacDonald to have read Tauler around the time of composing *The Diary*.
10. Cf. *Theologica Germanica* VIII: “If the soul is to gaze or look into eternity, it must become chastened and empty of images and detached from all created things and, above all, from the claims of self. This is the reason some hold that eternity cannot possibly be grasped in temporal

existence" (Hoffman's translation, 68).

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